

CHAPTER XVII

THOUGHT AND RESERVE POWER

Providence is always on the side of the last reserve.

—NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

So mightiest powers by deepest calms are fed,
And sleep, how oft, in things that gentlest be!

—BARRY CORNWALL, *The Sea in Calm*.

What would happen if you should overdraw your bank account? As a rule the check would be protested; but if you were on friendly terms with the bank, your check might be honored, and you would be called upon to make good the overdraft.

Nature has no such favorites, therefore extends no credits. She is as relentless as a gasoline tank—when the “gas” is all used the machine stops. It is as reckless for a speaker to risk going before an audience without having something in reserve as it is for the motorist to essay a long journey in the wilds without enough gasoline in sight.

But in what does a speaker’s reserve power consist? In a well-founded reliance on his general and particular grasp of his subject; in the quality of being alert and resourceful in thought—particularly in the ability to think while on his feet; and in that self-possession which makes one the captain of all his own forces, bodily and mental.

The first of these elements, adequate preparation, and the last, self-reliance, were discussed fully in the chapters on “Self-Confidence” and “Fluency,” so they will be touched only incidentally here; besides, the next chapter will take up specific methods of preparation for public speaking.

Therefore the central theme of this chapter is the second of the elements of reserve power—Thought.

The Mental Storehouse

An empty mind, like an empty larder, may be a serious matter or not—all will depend on the available resources. If there is no food in the cupboard the housewife does not nervously rattle the empty dishes; she telephones the grocer. If you have no ideas, do not rattle your empty *ers* and *ahs*, but get some ideas, and don't speak until you do get them.

This, however, is not being what the old New England housekeeper used to call "forehanded." The real solution of the problem of what to do with an empty head is never to let it become empty. In the artesian wells of Dakota the water rushes to the surface and leaps a score of feet above the ground. The secret of this exuberant flow is of course the great supply below, crowding to get out.

What is the use of stopping to prime a mental pump when you can fill your life with the resources for an artesian well? It is not enough to have merely enough; you must have more than enough. Then the pressure of your mass of thought and feeling will maintain your flow of speech and give you the confidence and poise that denote reserve power. To be away from home with only the exact return fare leaves a great deal to circumstances!

Reserve power is magnetic. It does not consist in giving the idea that you are holding something in reserve, but rather in the suggestion that the audience is getting the cream of your observation, reading, experience, feeling, thought. To have reserve power, therefore, you must have enough milk of material on hand to supply sufficient cream.

But how shall we get the milk? There are two ways: the one is first-hand—from the cow; the other is second-hand—from the milkman.

The Seeing Eye

Some sage has said: "For a thousand men who can speak, there is only one who can think; for a thousand men who can think, there is only one who can see." To see and to think is to get your milk from your own cow.

When the one man in a million who can see comes along, we call him Master. Old Mr. Holbrook, of "Cranford," asked his guest what color ash-buds were in March; she confessed she did not know, to which the old gentleman answered: "I knew you didn't. No more did I—an old fool that I am!—till this young man comes and tells me. 'Black as ash-buds in March.' And I've lived all my life in the country. More shame for me not to know. Black; they are jet-black, madam."

"This young man" referred to by Mr. Holbrook was Tennyson.

Henry Ward Beecher said: "I do not believe that I have ever met a man on the street that I did not get from him some element for a sermon. I never see anything in nature which does not work towards that for which I give the strength of my life. The material for my sermons is all the time following me and swarming up around me."

Instead of saying only one man in a million can see, it would strike nearer the truth to say that none of us sees with perfect understanding more than a fraction of what passes before our eyes, yet this faculty of acute and accurate observation is so important that no man ambitious to lead can neglect it. The next time you are in a car, look at those who sit opposite you and see what you can discover of their habits, occupations, ideals, nationalities, environments, education, and so on. You may not see a great deal the first time, but practise will reveal astonishing results. Transmute every incident of your day into a subject for a speech or an illustration. Translate all that you see into terms of speech. When you can describe all that you have seen in definite words, you are seeing clearly. You are becoming the millionth man.

De Maupassant's description of an author should also fit the public-speaker: "His eye is like a suction pump, absorbing everything; like a pickpocket's hand, always at work. Nothing escapes him. He is constantly collecting material, gathering-up glances, gestures, intentions, everything that goes on in his presence—the slightest look, the least act, the merest trifle." De Maupassant was himself a millionth man, a Master.

"Ruskin took a common rock-crystal and saw hidden within its stolid heart lessons which have not yet ceased to move men's lives. Beecher stood for hours before the window of a jewelry store thinking out analogies between jewels and the souls of men. Gough saw in a single drop of water enough truth wherewith to quench the thirst of five thousand souls. Thoreau sat so still in the shadowy woods that birds and insects came and opened up their secret lives to his eye. Emerson observed the soul of a man so long that at length he could say, 'I cannot hear what you say, for seeing what you are.' Preyer for three years studied the life of his babe and so became an authority upon the child mind. Observation! Most men are blind. There are a thousand times as many hidden truths and undiscovered facts about us to-day as have made discoverers famous—facts waiting for some one to 'pluck out the heart of their mystery.' But so long as men go about the search with eyes that see not, so long will these hidden pearls lie in their shells. Not an orator but who could more effectively point and feather his shafts were he to search nature rather than libraries. Too few can see 'sermons in stones' and 'books in the running brooks,' because they are so used to seeing merely sermons in books and only stones in running brooks. Sir Philip Sidney had a saying, 'Look in thy heart and write;' Massillon explained his astute knowledge of the human heart by saying, 'I learned it by studying myself;' Byron says of John Locke that 'all his knowledge of the human understanding was derived from studying his own mind.' Since multiform nature is all about us, originality ought not to be so rare."¹

The Thinking Mind

Thinking is doing mental arithmetic with facts. Add this fact to that and you reach a certain conclusion. Subtract this truth from another and you have a definite result. Multiply this fact by another and have a precise product. See how many times this occurrence happens in that space of time and you have reached a calculable dividend. In thought-processes you perform every known problem of arithmetic and algebra. That is why mathematics are such excellent mental gymnastics. But by the same token, thinking is work. Thinking takes energy. Thinking requires time, and patience, and broad information, and clearheadedness. Beyond a miserable little surface-scratching, few people really think at all—only one in a thousand, according to the pundit already quoted. So long as the present system of education prevails and children are taught through the ear rather than through the eye, so long as they are expected to remember thoughts of others rather than think for themselves, this proportion will continue—one man in a million will be able to see, and one in a thousand to think.

But, however thought-less a mind has been, there is promise of better things so soon as the mind detects its own lack of thought-power. The first step is to stop regarding thought as “the magic of the mind,” to use Byron’s expression, and see it as thought truly is—*a weighing of ideas and a placing of them in relationships to each other*. Ponder this definition and see if you have learned to think efficiently.

Habitual thinking is just that—a habit. Habit comes of doing a thing repeatedly. The lower habits are acquired easily, the higher ones require deeper grooves if they are to persist. So we find that the thought-habit comes only with resolute practise; yet no effort will yield richer dividends. Persist in practise, and whereas you have been able to think only an inch-deep into a subject, you will soon find that you can penetrate it a foot.

Perhaps this homely metaphor will suggest how to begin the practise of consecutive thinking, by which we mean *welding a number of separate*

thought-links into a chain that will hold. Take one link at a time, see that each naturally belongs with the ones you link to it, and remember that a single missing link means *no chain*.

Thinking is the most fascinating and exhilarating of all mental exercises. Once realize that your opinion on a subject does not represent the choice you have made between what Dr. Cerebrum has written and Professor Cerebellum has said, but is the result of your own earnestly-applied brain-energy, and you will gain a confidence in your ability to speak on that subject that nothing will be able to shake. Your thought will have given you both power and reserve power.

Someone has condensed the relation of thought to knowledge in these pungent, homely lines:

“Don’t give me the man who thinks he thinks,
Don’t give me the man who thinks he knows,
But give me the man who knows he thinks,
And I have the man who knows he knows!”

Reading As a Stimulus to Thought

No matter how dry the cow, however, nor how poor our ability to milk, there is still the milkman—we can read what others have seen and felt and thought. Often, indeed, such records will kindle within us that pre-essential and vital spark, the *desire* to be a thinker.

The following selection is taken from one of Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis’s lectures, as given in “A Man’s Value to Society.” Dr. Hillis is a most fluent speaker—he never refers to notes. He has reserve power. His mind is a veritable treasure-house of facts and ideas. See how he draws from a knowledge of fifteen different general or special subjects: geology, plant life, Palestine, chemistry, Eskimos, mythology, literature, The Nile, history, law, wit, evolution, religion, biography, and electricity. Surely, it needs no

sage to discover that the secret of this man's reserve power is the old secret of our artesian well whose abundance surges from unseen depths.

THE USES OF BOOKS AND READING¹

Each Kingsley approaches a stone as a jeweler approaches a casket to unlock the hidden gems. Geikie causes the bit of hard coal to unroll the juicy bud, the thick odorous leaves, the pungent boughs, until the bit of carbon enlarges into the beauty of a tropic forest. That little book of Grant Allen's called "How Plants Grow" exhibits trees and shrubs as eating, drinking and marrying. We see certain date groves in Palestine, and other date groves in the desert a hundred miles away, and the pollen of the one carried upon the trade winds to the branches of the other. We see the tree with its strange system of water-works, pumping the sap up through pipes and mains; we see the chemical laboratory in the branches mixing flavor for the orange in one bough, mixing the juices of the pineapple in another; we behold the tree as a mother making each infant acorn ready against the long winter, rolling it in swaths soft and warm as wool blankets, wrapping it around with garments impervious to the rain, and finally slipping the infant acorn into a sleeping bag, like those the Eskimos gave Dr. Kane.

At length we come to feel that the Greeks were not far wrong in thinking each tree had a dryad in it, animating it, protecting it against destruction, dying when the tree withered. Some Faraday shows us that each drop of water is a sheath for electric forces sufficient to charge 800,000 Leyden jars, or drive an engine from Liverpool to London. Some Sir William Thomson tells us how hydrogen gas will chew up a large iron spike as a child's molars will chew off the end of a stick of candy. Thus each new book opens up some new and hitherto unexplored realm of nature. Thus books fulfill for us the legend of the wondrous glass that showed its owner all things distant and all things hidden. Through books our world becomes as "a bud from the bower of God's beauty; the sun as a spark from the light of His wisdom; the sky as a bubble on the sea of His Power." Therefore Mrs. Browning's words, "No child can be called fatherless who has God and his mother; no youth can be called friendless who has God and the companionship of good books."

Books also advantage us in that they exhibit the unity of progress, the solidarity of the race, and the continuity of history. Authors lead us back along the pathway of law, of liberty or religion, and set us down in front of the great man in whose brain the principle had its rise. As the discoverer leads us from the mouth of the Nile back to the headwaters of Nyanza, so books exhibit great ideas and institutions, as they move forward, ever widening and deepening, like some Nile feeding many civilizations. For all the reforms of to-day go back to some reform of yesterday. Man's art goes back to Athens and Thebes. Man's laws go back to Blackstone and Justinian. Man's reapers and plows go back to the savage scratching the ground with his forked stick, drawn by the wild bullock. The heroes of liberty march forward in a solid column. Lincoln grasps the hand of Washington. Washington received his weapons at the hands of Hampden and Cromwell. The great Puritans lock hands with Luther and Savonarola.

The unbroken procession brings us at length to Him whose Sermon on the Mount was the very charter of liberty. It puts us under a divine spell to perceive that we are all coworkers with the great men, and yet single threads in the warp and woof of civilization. And when books have related us to our own age, and related all the epochs to God, whose providence is the gulf stream of history, these teachers go on to stimulate us to new and greater achievements. Alone, man is an unlighted candle. The mind needs some book to kindle its faculties. Before Byron began to write he used to give half an hour to reading some favorite passage. The thought of some great writer never failed to kindle Byron into a creative glow, even as a match lights the kindlings upon the grate. In these burning, luminous moods Byron's mind did its best work. The true book stimulates the mind as no wine can ever quicken the blood. It is reading that brings us to our best, and rouses each faculty to its most vigorous life.

We recognize this as pure cream, and if it seems at first to have its secondary source in the friendly milkman, let us not forget that the theme is "The Uses of Books and Reading." Dr. Hillis both sees and thinks.

It is fashionable just now to decry the value of reading. We read, we are told, to avoid the necessity of thinking for ourselves. Books are for the mentally lazy.

Though this is only a half-truth, the element of truth it contains is large enough to make us pause. Put yourself through a good old Presbyterian soul-searching self-examination, and if reading-from-thought-laziness is one of your sins, confess it. No one can shrive you of it—but yourself. Do penance for it by using your own brains, for it is a transgression that dwarfs the growth of thought and destroys mental freedom. At first the penance will be trying—but at the last you will be glad in it.

Reading should entertain, give information, or stimulate thought. Here, however, we are chiefly concerned with information, and stimulation of thought.

What shall I read for information?

The ample page of knowledge, as Grey tells us, is "rich with the spoils of time," and these are ours for the price of a theatre ticket. You may command Socrates and Marcus Aurelius to sit beside you and discourse of their choicest, hear Lincoln at Gettysburg and Pericles at Athens, storm the

Bastile with Hugo, and wander through Paradise with Dante. You may explore darkest Africa with Stanley, penetrate the human heart with Shakespeare, chat with Carlyle about heroes, and delve with the Apostle Paul into the mysteries of faith. The general knowledge and the inspiring ideas that men have collected through ages of toil and experiment are yours for the asking. The Sage of Chelsea was right: “The true university of these days is a collection of books.”

To master a worth-while book is to master much else besides; few of us, however, make perfect conquest of a volume without first owning it physically. To read a borrowed book may be a joy, but to assign your own book a place of its own on your own shelves—be they few or many—to love the book and feel of its worn cover, to thumb it over slowly, page by page, to pencil its margins in agreement or in protest, to smile or thrill with its remembered pungencies—no mere book borrower could ever sense all that delight.

The reader who possesses books in this double sense finds also that his books possess him, and the volumes which most firmly grip his life are likely to be those it has cost him some sacrifice to own. These lightly-come-by titles, which Mr. Fatpurse selects, perhaps by proxy, can scarcely play the guide, philosopher and friend in crucial moments as do the books—long coveted, joyously attained—that are welcomed into the lives, and not merely the libraries, of us others who are at once poorer and richer.

So it is scarcely too much to say that of all the many ways in which an owned—a mastered—book is like to a human friend, the truest ways are these: A friend is worth making sacrifices for, both to gain and to keep; and our loves go out most dearly to those into whose inmost lives we have sincerely entered.

When you have not the advantage of the test of time by which to judge books, investigate as thoroughly as possible the authority of the books you read. Much that is printed and passes current is counterfeit. “I read it in a

book” is to many a sufficient warranty of truth, but not to the thinker. “What book?” asks the careful mind. “Who wrote it? What does he know about the subject and what right has he to speak on it? Who recognizes him as authority? With what other recognized authorities does he agree or disagree?” Being caught trying to pass counterfeit money, even unintentionally, is an unpleasant situation. Beware lest you circulate spurious coin.

Above all, seek reading that makes you use your own brains. Such reading must be alive with fresh points of view, packed with special knowledge, and deal with subjects of vital interest. Do not confine your reading to what you already know you will agree with. Opposition wakes one up. The other road may be the better, but you will never know it unless you “give it the once over.” Do not do all your thinking and investigating in front of given “Q. E. D.’s;” merely assembling reasons to fill in between your theorem and what you want to prove will get you nowhere. Approach each subject with an open mind and—once sure that you have thought it out thoroughly and honestly—have the courage to abide by the decision of your own thought. But don’t brag about it afterward.

No book on public speaking will enable you to discourse on the tariff if you know nothing about the tariff. Knowing more about it than the other man will be your only hope for making the other man listen to you.

Take a group of men discussing a governmental policy of which some one says: “It is socialistic.” That will commend the policy to Mr. A., who believes in socialism, but condemn it to Mr. B., who does not. It may be that neither had considered the policy beyond noticing that its surface-color was socialistic. The chances are, furthermore, that neither Mr. A. nor Mr. B. has a definite idea of what socialism really is, for as Robert Louis Stevenson says, “Man lives not by bread alone but chiefly by catch words.” If you are of this group of men, and have observed this proposed government policy, and investigated it, and thought about it, what you have

to say cannot fail to command their respect and approval, for you will have shown them that you possess a grasp of your subject and—to adopt an exceedingly expressive bit of slang—*then* some.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Robert Houdin trained his son to give one swift glance at a shop window in passing and be able to report accurately a surprising number of its contents. Try this several times on different windows and report the result.

2. What effect does reserve power have on an audience?

3. What are the best methods for acquiring reserve power?

4. What is the danger of too much reading?

5. Analyze some speech that you have read or heard and notice how much real information there is in it. Compare it with Dr. Hillis's speech on "Brave Little Belgium," [page 394](#).

6. Write out a three-minute speech on any subject you choose. How much information, and what new ideas, does it contain? Compare your speech with the extract on [page 191](#) from Dr. Hillis's "The Uses of Books and Reading."

7. Have you ever read a book on the practise of thinking? If so, give your impressions of its value.

NOTE: There are a number of excellent books on the subject of thought and the management of thought. The following are recommended as being especially helpful:

"Thinking and Learning to Think," Nathan C. Schaeffer; "Talks to Students on the Art of Study," Cramer; "As a Man Thinketh," Allen.

8. Define (a) logic; (b) mental philosophy (or mental science); (c) psychology; (d) abstract.

¹ *How to Attract and Hold an Audience*, J. Berg Esenwein.

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